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ABSTRACT

Northampton County Area Community College (Pennsylvania) studied changes in student writing ability using a research paradigm described in the ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges' fifth topical paper (ED 030 422). Students in seven English classes were randomly assigned to write on one of two topics at the beginning of the semester, and asked to write on the other topic at the end of the semester. Evaluation proceeded by mixing pre- and post-writing samples, and then distributing them for grading, in accordance with a 22-item rating sheet. Samples were identified by a student code number that did not indicate whether they were pre- or post-writing samples. The "t" ratio for related sample means was used to investigate any significant differences between mean scores, and writing strengths and weaknesses for pre- and post-writing samples were compared. Also, 40 of the 87 students studied did not provide a post-writing sample because of withdrawal or other absence. Their writing strengths and weaknesses were compared with those who took both the pre- and post-tests. Finally, the students who did improve their scores were compared with those who did not. While the research procedures and scoring system indicate that the students as a group did not learn to write better, such factors as student absences, motivation, and measuring instrument validity will be further investigated through a replication of the study. (JO)

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ED040703

Is Anyone Learning to Write at NCACC?

A Research Report

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Northampton County Area Community College

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LOS ANGELES

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CLEARINGHOUSE FOR
JUNIOR COLLEGE
INFORMATION

Is Anyone Learning to Write at NCACC?

In an attempt to answer this question objectively the College's English Department set up a research study whose design was recommended by the ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior College Information.[1]

During the first weeks of the spring semester the students in seven English II classes were given at random either topic S or topic W on which to write.

Topic S: "You can tell the character of every man when you see how he receives praise."

Seneca (4 B.C. - 65 A.D.) Epistles

Topic W: "Children begin by loving their parents; as they grow older they judge them; sometimes they forgive them."

Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray

The student's identification was coded by the coordinator of the research project. At the end of the semester the students were again asked to write on a topic. If they had written on topic W earlier they now wrote on topic S, and vice versa. Again student identification was coded. The coordinator then mixed the pre-writing samples and post-writing samples and distributed them to the instructors to be graded. The instructors did not know who had written the papers or whether or not they were the pre or post writing samples.

During the semester the instructors developed a scoring sheet based on the one recommended by ERIC. It consisted of 22 rating areas and each area was rated "1" or "0". A perfect score would have a score of 22. During the creation of this scoring procedure it is assumed that the instructors came to agreement on not only what areas were to be rated but also to agreement when a paper had or had not this rating. (The scoring sheet can be found attached.)

The papers were scored and returned to the coordinator. Pre and post writing total scores were then tabulated as well as item scores. The statistical evaluation is based on 87 pairs of writing samples. An analysis will also be done on the pre-writing samples of the 49 students that either dropped-out of College, withdrew from the English class, or were not in class on that day.

The first and major question that is to be answered is whether or not there is a gain in scores from pre-to-post and if this gain is significant. The method of analysis is the t ratio for related sample means. The t value is 0.428 and hence there is no significant difference between the mean scores. Hence it is therefore concluded, based upon the scoring system and the research procedures, that these students, as a group, did not learn how to write.

[1] Is Anyone Learning to Write?, ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior College Information, University of California, Los Angeles, California, February, 1969.

The following tables shows the means, standard deviations, and ranges of the pre-and-post-writing samples.

Table I Pre-and-Post-Writing Samples Group Data N = 87

	Mean	S. D.	Range
Pre-Writing Samples	11.54	4.33	4 - 21
Post-Writing Samples	11.78	4.98	2 - 22

The second area of concern is the values of the pre-and-post scores the group received with respect to each scoring area.

Table II Scoring Area Totals and Percentages

Area	Pre-Writing Sample Total Score (N= 87)		Post-Writing Sample Total Score (N= 87)	
	N	%	N	%
1	26	30	27	31
2	6	7	12	14
3	58	67	53	61
4	35	40	40	46
5	64	74	64	74
6	43	49	41	47
7	22	25	24	28
8	48	55	48	55
9	44	51	42	48
10	26	30	32	37
11	52	60	58	67
12	60	70	59	68
13	43	49	36	41
14	68	78	67	77
15	55	63	54	62
16	48	55	59	68
17	46	53	37	43
18	64	74	63	72
19	68	78	64	74
20	35	40	43	49
21	24	28	33	38
22	70	80	71	82

In analyzing the above table one can see that there is very little difference between the pre-and-post-scores for each area. However, the purpose of the table is to enable one to describe the areas of strengths and weaknesses in writing of this group. It must be remembered that the group had total mean percentage scores of 52 and 54 respectively. For scoring area 1, for example, 26 out of the 87 students scored 1's on the pre-writing sample.

The writing strengths, in descending order, of the group on the pre-writing samples are:

Table III Pre-Writing Sample Strengths

Area	Name of Area	%
22	There is variety in sentence structure	80
19	There are not errors in use of modifiers	78
14	Punctuation errors are not excessive	78
18	There is not faulty parallellism	74
5	There is a thesis	74
12	There are not many misspellings	70
3	Ideas are rational or logical	67

The writing weaknesses, in ascending order, of the group on the pre-writing samples are:

Table IV Pre-Writing Sample Weaknesses

Area	Name of Area	%
2	Ideas are creative or original	7
7	Thesis is adequately developed	25
21	The sentences are awkward	28
1	Ideas themselves are insightful	30
10	Each paragraph is developed with relevant and concrete details	30
4	Ideas are expressed with clarity	40

The writing strengths, in descending order, of the group on the post-writing samples are:

Table V Post-Writing Sample Strengths

Area	Name of Area	%
22	There is variety in sentence structure	82
14	Punctuation errors are not excessive	77
5	There is a thesis	74
18	There is not faulty parallelism	72
19	There are not errors in the use of modifiers	74
12	There are not many misspellings	68
16	There are not errors in the use of apostrophes	68
11	The details that are included are well ordered	67

The writing weaknesses, in ascending order, of the group on the post-writing samples are:

Table VI Post-Writing Sample Weaknesses

Area	Name of Area	%
2	Ideas are creative or original	14
7	Thesis is adequately developed	28
1	Ideas themselves are insightful	31
10	Each paragraph is developed with relevant and concrete details	37
21	The sentences are awkward	38

The areas of the strengths and weaknesses of both pre-and-post-writing samples are practically identical. The three areas that show the most increase, and this need not be improvement but rather regression towards the mean, are areas 16, 21, and 20.

Table VII Area Increases in Pre-and-Post-Writing Samples

Area	Name of Area	% Increase
16	There are not errors in use of apostrophes	13
21	The sentences are not awkward	10
20	There are not distracting errors	9

It must be pointed out again that as a group there was no significant improvement in writing.

The areas in which the achievement decreased were:

Table VIII Area Decreases in Pre-and-Post-Writing Samples

Area	Name of Area	% Decrease
17	There are errors in use of pronouns	10
13	There are serious punctuation errors	8
3	Ideas are rational or logical	6

Although most of the group scored between 7 and 16 on the pre-writing sample (representing a percentage grade, if the areas are equivalent, of 32 to 73 respectively), it should be valuable to investigate the pre-writing sample scores of those 49 students that withdrew from the class, or withdrew from the College, or that simply were absent for the post-writing sample.

Table IX Group Data on Students With Pre-Writing Sample Only N = 49

Mean	S. D.	Range
10.61	3.61	2 - 21

There is a difference in mean scores between the pre-post group and this group but the difference is not significant (z = 1.347). Compare with Table I.

Although the mean scores are not significantly different it may be that an analysis of the item scores will show differences.

Table X Area Scores of Pre-Writing Sample Group N = 49

Area	N	%	Area	N	%
1	13	27	12	28	57
2	4	8	13	24	49
3	26	53	14	33	67
4	18	37	15	26	53
5	36	73	16	27	55
6	20	41	17	25	51
7	5	10	18	35	71
8	24	49	19	40	82
9	24	49	20	19	39
10	13	27	21	17	35
11	23	47	22	41	84

The writing strengths, in descending order, of the group with just pre-writing sample scores are:

Table XI Pre-Writing Sample Strengths - Pre-Group

Area	Name of Area	%
22	There is variety in sentence structure	84
19	There are not errors in use of modifiers	82
5	There is a thesis	73
18	There is not faulty parallelism	71
14	Punctuation errors are not excessive	67

This table compares equivalently to that of the pre-writing sample strenghts of the pre-post group. Compare with Table III. The writing weaknesses, in ascending order, of the group with just pre-writing sample scores are:

Table XII Pre-Writing Sample Weaknesses - Pre-Group

Area	Name of Area	%
2	Ideas are creative or original	8
7	Thesis is adequately developed	10
10	Each paragraph is developed with relevant and concrete details	27
1	Ideas themselves are insightful	27
21	The sentences are awkward	35
4	Ideas are expressed with clarity	37
20	There are distracting errors in word usage	39

Again this table compares remarkably equivalent to that of the weaknesses of the pre-post group. Compare with Table IV. The hope was, in this part of the investigation, to discover a difference between the groups. However there was none.

The next area of concern is to investigate whether or not there are any differences between the group of students that did improve their scores and the group that did not. The following table describes this group that showed an improvement.

Table XIII Improvement-in-Writing-Scores Group (N = 44)

Pre-Post Scores	Sex	G. S.	ACT English	ACT Soc. Sci.	Final Grade
7-9	M	Y	10	24	C
8-15	M	Y	11	17	D
6-16	M	Y	16	21	C
18-22	F	N	--	--	B
16-20	F	N	--	--	C
10-14	F	N	--	--	B
8-9	M	Y	14	21	D
11-12	M	N	--	--	B
12-22	F	N	--	--	B
10-11	M	N	--	--	C
6-8	M	N	17	03	C
7-12	M	N	--	--	B
11-12	M	N	--	--	B
5-16	F	N	--	--	C
12-18	F	N	--	--	B
14-18	F	N	--	--	B
14-15	M	Y	14	16	W
3-20	M	N	23	25	B
11-13	M	N	16	20	C
9-13	F	Y	18	13	C
6-12	M	N	--	--	A
15-19	F	N	--	--	A
11-13	M	N	--	--	B
16-21	F	N	19	21	A
10-19	M	N	--	--	B
17-22	F	N	--	--	C
11-12	M	N	19	04	B
13-15	F	N	22	28	B
13-18	M	Y	15	14	C
13-15	M	N	--	--	C
6-10	M	Y	14	12	D
13-17	M	Y	17	15	C
10-16	M	N	20	17	C
10-18	M	N	20	27	B
6-17	M	Y	10	13	C
3-6	M	Y	09	11	F
5-6	M	N	--	--	C
4-9	M	Y	13	23	C
7-12	M	Y	10	12	C
15-16	M	N	18	25	B
11-16	F	Y	14	14	C
6-9	M	Y	09	14	B
7-11	M	Y	19	23	D
8-9	F	Y	16	16	C

Table XIV Group With No Improvement in Writing Scores (N = 43)

Pre-Post Scores	Sex	G. S.	ACT English	ACT Soc. Sci.	Final Grade
14-11	M	Y	08	09	C
12-11	M	Y	14	14	C
11-8	M	N	--	--	C
8-3	M	Y	13	11	F
9-6	M	Y	10	19	D
11-4	M	Y	11	15	D
10-6	M	N	17	10	D
19-10	M	Y	12	13	C
12-7	M	N	23	22	C
14-7	M	N	--	--	B
19-19	F	N	--	--	B
16-15	F	N	--	--	D
17-10	M	N	13	20	B
20-16	M	N	--	--	B
8-7	M	N	--	--	B
12-12	F	N	18	18	C
11-10	M	Y	08	17	F
12-11	M	Y	10	11	D
4-3	M	Y	12	14	D
8-7	F	N	18	12	D
9-9	M	Y	16	12	D
7-7	M	N	--	--	B
10-10	M	N	--	--	C
10-8	F	N	--	--	C
9-9	F	N	--	--	A
11-5	M	N	05	02	A
18-9	M	N	--	--	A
7-7	M	Y	03	01	B
19-18	F	N	25	24	A
13-5	M	N	20	24	C
19-9	M	Y	--	--	C
14-11	M	Y	15	10	B
16-10	M	Y	12	27	D
10-6	M	Y	11	07	D
14-6	M	N	15	06	B
17-10	M	N	--	--	B
16-15	M	N	14	14	B
12-9	M	Y	11	07	B
10-10	M	Y	03	15	B
15-3	M	Y	10	18	C
19-19	M	N	24	32	B
21-12	F	N	--	--	I
20-12	F	N	--	--	A

Because of missing ACT scores it is impossible to compare the two groups in this aspect. A summary of Tables XIII and XIV leads to the following description of the two groups:

Table XV Improvement-in-Writing Scores Group (N = 44) vs. Group with No Improvement in Writing Scores (N = 43)

	Improve Group	No Improve Group
Number of males	30	35
Number of females	14	9
Number with G. S. Writing	16	18
Mean Final Grade in Course	2.37	2.24

It is obvious from the table above that there are no real differences between the groups other than the groups themselves.

The last area that concerned this researcher was the actual make-up of the group of students that had written the pre-writing sample. With help from the records office it was determined that of these 49 students, 21 had in fact withdrawn from the course while the remaining 28 simply were absent from class that day.

Conclusions

1. With the assumption of reliability of research design and validity and reliability of the measuring instrument, the students did not learn how to write.

2. There are no definable factors which differentiate the students that showed improvement with those that did not.

Implications and Speculations:

1. That the students were not taught how to write.

2. That the students did not learn how to write.

3. That the measuring instrument is invalid.

4. That the scores were not consistent.

5. The research procedures, i.e. the students spending a period to write an essay and never getting it back, did little to motivate the students to perform at his highest level the second time around.

6. The lack of control, i.e., the 28 students that did not take the post-writing sample, affected the results.

Recommendations:

1. After study and evaluation by the English department the study be replicated with a revised scoring procedure and better control.

2. That this study be interpreted as a pilot study and that through analysis and evaluation of it, that additional testable hypotheses be generated for use in the second study.

SCORE SHEET

	YES	NO		
Content I.	_____	_____	1.	Ideas themselves are insightful.
	_____	_____	2.	Ideas are creative or original.
	_____	_____	3.	Ideas are rational or logical.
	_____	_____	4.	Ideas are expressed with clarity.
Organization II.	_____	_____	5.	There is a thesis.
	_____	_____	6.	The thesis idea is developed in a logical order.
	_____	_____	7.	Thesis is adequately developed.
	_____	_____	8.	Every paragraph is relevant to the thesis.
	_____	_____	9.	Each paragraph has a controlling idea.
	_____	_____	10.	Each paragraph is developed with relevant and concrete details.
	_____	_____	11.	The details that are included are well ordered.
Mechanics III.	_____	_____	12.	There are many misspellings.
	_____	_____	13.	There are serious punctuation errors.
	_____	_____	14.	Punctuation errors are excessive.
	_____	_____	15.	There are errors in use of verbs.
	_____	_____	16.	There are errors in use of apostrophes.
	_____	_____	17.	There are errors in use of pronouns.
	_____	_____	18.	There is faulty parallellism.
	_____	_____	19.	There are errors in use of modifiers.
	_____	_____	20.	There are distracting errors in word usage.
	_____	_____	21.	The sentences are awkward.
	_____	_____	22.	There is variety in sentence structure.

CODE NO. _____